History of Femicide and South Asian Feminists' Perspective

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Authors Note

This paper is one of the products of my on-going pursuit of studying and discussing gender based violence in South Asia. I believe in the process of studying women's experiences of gender-based violence from an othered lens, the personal aspects of their struggle and life story often go unacknowledged. In my writings and work, I hope to decolonize South Asian women's struggles and life stories by deconstructing Orientalist nuances and by highlighting the work of South Asian authors and feminists. My inspiration for this work comes from observing and understanding the struggles and achievements of South Asian women in my own life and beyond. Almost every South Asian woman I know has been through some form of gender-based violence and each experience has had multiple nuances to it. I hope that communities and the larger world will develop understanding and empathy for the struggles that survivors and victims of gender-based violence go through, so that they will no longer feel isolated with the pain. Finally and most importantly, this paper is a small tribute to women who lost their lives to femicide, including Qandeel Baloch, Roop Kanwar, Qurat-ul-Ain and Noor Mukadam amongst many others.

Abstract

Femicide, taking different forms including honour killing and infanticide, in South Asia has remained an important part of discourse around gender-based violence in the region. Much of the research done on femicide, like other forms of gender-based violence in South Asia, has been done by Western researchers. This paper argues that much of the Western work around femicide in South Asia adopts an Orientalist approach which often results in the 'othering' of the experiences and struggles of South Asian women. In order to discuss different aspects of their struggle and experiences, this paper focuses on two cases of femicide in South Asia and the corresponding responses from South Asian feminists. In discussing nuances related to the culture and women's personal lives, the paper focuses on their advocacy and the consequent impact which often goes undiscussed when their suffering is 'othered' and deemed incomprehensible in mainstream discourses.

Introduction

Femicide, the intentional killing of females because of their sex, remains very prevalent in South Asia. Intersection of ethnographic and anthropological studies show that violence against women is common in South Asia due to an amalgamation of religious, cultural, and legal reasons. Some forms of gender-based violence are very specific to South Asian countries, including dowry violence, honour killings, sati, a practice in which widows sacrifice themselves atop their husbands' funeral pyres, and female infanticide. Oftentimes the violence entails intentional murder of women for multiple reasons, including but not limited to the breach of socially constructed notions like 'honour,' lack of economic resources, family disputes, and a lack of dowry. It was estimated that over 2,000 women were killed in Pakistan in the year 2000 alone (Niaz 2003, 179). Moreover, in New Delhi, a study showed that in almost 94% of violent incidents, the victim and the offender were from the same family, and in 9 out of 10 cases, wives were murdered by their husbands (Niaz 179).

The strong presence of the patriarchy in South Asia both enables and perpetuates femicide. In centering cultural aspects that enable certain forms of violence specific to South Asia, this paper will discuss how Western work that addresses gender-based violence in South Asia uses primarily Orientalist and colonial approaches. It will further discuss the importance of incorporating South Asian feminists' perspectives to understand the nuances and personal aspects of femicide in South Asia. The instances of femicide will be discussed on a case-study basis to acknowledge the cultural nuances that play out and the states' reactions to said cases. Specifically, I will focus on Roop Kanwar's sati in Rajasthan, India and Qandeel Baloch's honour killing in Pakistan. In doing so, I will discuss the perspectives of South Asian feminists and their importance, emphasizing the need for decolonizing the study of gender-based violence in South Asia.

Roop Kanwar's Sati

The Hindu practice of sati has been long criticised by the Western world and deemed barbaric and inhumane. Dr. Murali argues that such categorization of sati as barbaric and 'uncivil' in Western academia is a result of power dynamics that are rooted in British colonization (Murali 2021) Under British rule in India, sati was condemned by the British as being an 'uncivil' part of Indian culture. Arguably 'othering' the act, this portrayal

presents sati as a part of an 'inferior culture' that deflects attention from the narratives of victims and demeans the culture at large. Dr. Murali terms this the "colonial gaze," arguing that it reduces gender-based violence into an incomprehensible 'other' (Murali 2021). These are features of an Orientalist approach, whereby cultures are studied and presented primarily through a Western, colonial lens. In order to understand the nuances of the personal experiences of women who endure various forms of gender-based violence such as sati, it is important to examine South Asian cases and the works of South Asian feminists.

Roop Kanwar's sati in particular has remained important for the discourse surrounding femicide in South Asia, both in literature and media. According to John Hawley, men in India glorified sati, viewing the women as courageous and dignified heroes (Hawley 1994, 5). In turn, the idea of a 'good woman' was associated strongly with sacrifice and submission (Hawley 1994, 12). This concept demonstrates that male approval and glorification were some of the factors that contributed to perpetuating the practice of sati. Since India has traditionally been a patriarchal society, the need for male approval remained central to women's domestic lives. In Hindu culture, patriarchal values enabled and perpetuated the subordination of women (Niaz 2003, 173). For example, Manu, the Hindu law-giver, developed a philosophy that shaped the narrative around what it means to be a 'good woman' in South Asia. He posited that such a woman is submissive, sacrificing, and subservient to men, and serves her husband similar to how she worships God (Niaz 174). Manu's philosophy remained particularly important because he created the Manu-smitri, an ancient book of Hindu laws, which includes the intersection of law, religion, and domestic life, and continues to shape Hindu society to this day (Das 2019). Scholars have argued that this notion of a 'good woman' is so deeply internalized by South Asian women that it manifests in voluntary engagement in sati (Niaz 2003, 173).

The reactions to Kanwar's sati show how deeply embedded the practice is in Hindu culture (Shaheed 2011, 141). While there are arguments that she was coerced into engaging in sati, there are also claims that she performed it voluntarily. According to many sources, Kanwar sat on the pyre and held her husband's head in her hands as she performed the act of sati (Hawley 1994, 7). Many interpreted this as a symbolic act of ultimate submission to her husband, representative of the cultural notions of a woman's devotion to her spouse. Those who claim that the sati was Kanwar's decision cite her devotion to the Rani Sati deity, a Rajasthani woman who committed sati on her husband's funeral pyre; they contend that Kanwar visited her shrine frequently (Chatterjea 1999, 82). Kanwar's sati in particular captivated the attention of the public because she belonged to a relatively wealthy Rajput family, a dominant social group in India, often considered quasi-royalty. Similarly, Kanwar's sati spurred discussion because her father was the headmaster of a school and their family was considered well educated (Shaheed 2011, 142). In other words, Kanwar had relatively greater access to social and intellectual capital compared to women from lower castes and social classes. (Shaheed 142). Despite her privileged background, Kanwar's submission to sati shows how the glorification and the cultural standard of being a 'good woman' was deeply internalized as part of Hindu Culture (Shaheed 141).

Moreover, scholars argue that another major reason why women chose to practice sati was that widows' status in India was not considered desirable and sacrificing their lives on their husbands' funeral pyres served as a way to avoid the struggles of widowhood. According to Shaheed, prior to the 20th century, Indian women were almost entirely dependent on their husbands and had to live in strict seclusion, with limited access to resources (Shaheed 2011, 144). Thus, living without a husband implied being cut off from most resources and social capital, making the idea of sati appealing to Indian widows. It is this fear of "living and leading a ghettoed

and cloistered life" that traditionally pushed Indian women to choose to commit sati (Shaheed 144). Additionally, widows were seen as burdens to their in-laws who were obliged to provide for them on account of their lack of resources. As stated by Shaheed, these underlying traditional values and norms show that the practice of sati is still deeply embedded in Hindu culture because families often ignore the circumstances of women's death in exchange for the benefits of immolation (Shaheed 144). Even though it is now illegal, and many widowed women in India actively choose to continue living their lives, sati is still specifically absorbed within the Rajput community as it is seen "as exemplifying the true Rajput identity" (Shaheed 145). The tradition is rooted in the Rajput ideal of ultimate sacrifice, and is perceived as a transformative process. Arguably, Kanwar's Rajput identity and related values of sacrifice, her adherence to Hindu culture, and the standard of being a 'good woman' were factors which led to her submission to sati despite being relatively educated.

Feminist Reaction to Roop Kanwar's Sati

Roop Kanwar's sati is regarded very significant for women's rights groups because it gained a lot of attention from the general public and feminist protestors (Hawley 1994, 8). Feminist writers analyzed the case by uncovering underlying cultural values and nuances that enable extreme cases of gender-based violence like sati. In patriarchal societies internalized misogyny often creates a culture in which widowed and single women are demonized for their sexuality (Shaheed 2011, 144). Furthermore, cultural norms that both perpetuate and enable violence towards women in India also include parents' attitudes. Parents often accept mistreatment of their daughters by their husbands and parents-in-law and encourage their daughters to "adjust at all costs in the marital home" (Shaheed 145). Shaheed cites Kishwar's work where she argues that as a result, "they too are endorsing the norm that a woman's life is worthless" (Shaheed 145). This attitude manifests in Kanwar's parents' reaction to the sati as they had no complaints about their daughter's death through such a practice (Shaheed 145).

South Asian feminists have noted that Kanwar's sati stood out and gained more attention than other cases. Sugirtharajah discusses that what made the difference was women's concern and activism in reaction to the sati. With a more global reach, Kanwar's case transformed the idea that a woman would be glorified for sati through a quasi-religious lens into a critical political issue whereby Indian women's voices were centered (Sugirtharajah 2001, 11). In commenting on how sati has been discussed and dissected globally, especially by scholars in the Western world, Chatterjea argues that there is a lot of scholarship on the circumstances and implications of Kanwar's sati but hardly any on the moment of her death and the pain she must have felt in the moment she died (Chatterjea 1999, 81). According to Chatterjea, the Orientalist method of failing to represent women's personal lived experiences, including those of pain and suffering, objectifies survivors and victims. With respect to Kanwar, Chatterjea notes that she strove to avoid "remember[ing] and objectify[ing] her like the colonial and mass media accounts did to previous satis" (Chatterjea 81). In addition, she points out that there are few sources of information on how a woman herself might feel when she sees the fire and knows that the flames would engulf her soon (Chatterjea 81). Such impersonal accounts of sati and gender-based violence detach the humanistic element which is arguably critical for the study of gender-based violence in any cultural context. Deeming the pain and suffering of third world women as unknowable or incomprehensible is problematic because it alleviates the responsibility of the Western world to understand the suffering of the 'other' as they experience it. South Asian feminists have long protested the casting of these women's suffering as being "beyond language" or

"beyond representation" as it implies inability and impossibility to understand and empathize (Alam 2020, 18). Thus, studying and describing events like Kanwar's sati through a Western and Orientalist approach takes away many nuances from the narrative and reduces the victims' character down to victims of culture.

Qandeel Baloch's Honour Killing

Another case that reveals the disparity in Western and South Asian feminists' portrayal of violence against women is that of Qandeel Baloch. Baloch was a Pakistani social media celebrity, activist, and model, who used videos and selfies to challenge the moral authority of Islamic clerics in Pakistan as well as to expose the hypocrisies and double standards related to women's sexuality in Pakistani society. Her content was often considered 'vulgar' based on Pakistani standards, and Baloch thus faced backlash very early on in her career. On July 15th 2016, Baloch was suffocated to death by her brother in an 'honour killing.' An honour killing entails the intentional killing of females, most often by male partners, family members, and relatives for violating socially held ideas of 'honour.' The idea of 'honour' is often based upon policing women's bodies to uphold societal perceptions of the values of modesty (Alam 2019, 76). Baloch's death became a benchmark for feminists and activists to advocate against honour killing in Pakistan and to uncover the nuances of femicide and the policing of female sexuality. Baloch's honour killing was sensationalized in the Western world by scholars and media; per an Orientalist approach, Baloch was recognized as a victim of injustice rather than an advocate for social justice and women's rights in Pakistan (Alam 2020, 77). Though describing Baloch as a victim of injustice is not entirely problematic, framing an individual who had made significant contributions to the fight for women's rights solely as a victim of violent misogyny implies that the cultural forces that caused her death are insurmountable. Such an Orientalist view about violence towards South Asian women deflects from the narrative of their advocacy and work towards challenging social norms and authority.

Baloch mindfully curated a certain audience that hypersexualized women and displayed deeply rooted misogyny to articulate matters of politics, sexism, hierarchies, and double standards. In April 2016, Baloch was invited on a talk show to debate with an Islamic cleric, Mufti Qavi, over the 'morality' of her social media striptease offer to the Pakistani cricket team (Alam 2020, 84). Qavi attacked Baloch by citing honour, decency, and modesty, demonstrating how women's sexuality and modesty had become issues concerning the entire community (Alam 84). Later that month, Baloch posted selfies and videos with Qavi in a hotel during the month of Ramadan, demonstrating a degree of physical closeness deemed a violation of values of gender segregation followed by many South Asians in general, let alone Islamic clerics (Alam 84). This shed light on the hypocrisy of many clerics who policed women and their bodies in public but indulged in contradictory activities in private. The structures that make it possible for clerics and other figures of authority to police women's bodies in public and mainstream media are a result of the patriarchal culture that demonizes women's sexuality and considers women's boldness and mobility a threat to the community. One week after Baloch posted these videos, she was found dead in her parents' house in Multan (Alam 86). Similar to Kanwar's sati, Baloch's murder garnered a significant reaction from feminists across Pakistan and led to socio-political changes (Habiba 2018, 247). Three months after her murder, Pakistan's parliament passed legislation approving a new anti-honour killing law, which removed an existing loophole that allowed killers to be freed after the family members pardoned them (Habiba 248).

Feminist Reaction to Qandeel Baloch's Murder

Feminists in Pakistan, through their work, scholarship, and activism, responded to Qandeel Baloch's murder in several ways. It is important to

consider the work of Pakistani feminists to study Baloch's case because the nuances of her life and murder are largely embedded in a cultural context. Habiba highlights that much of the work done around Baloch's murder involves philanthrophic concerns regarding women in South Asia, making the core assumption that honour killings are a product of backward societies (Habiba 2018, 249). Habiba hence uncovers an 'othering' phenomenon, which often leads to an unclear understanding of societal factors that lead to the killing (Habiba 248). She further argues that Western works that associate the phenomenon with a certain culture or religion only present the "half truth" (Habiba 248). In contrast, a more comprehensive understanding would entail insight and attention to detail of the victims' lives, struggles, and acknowledgement of the history of cultural contexts.

Pakistani feminists responded to the murder by trying to shed light on Baloch's life, activism, and advocacy for social justice. On the 8th of March, International Women's Day, women from major cities in Pakistan take part in the annual Aurat March (Women's March) and wear Baloch masks symbolising her pro-feminist advocacy in the Pakistani context (Alam 2020, 77). Alam draws a parallel between Baloch's life and her activism, positing that she was a "do-it-yourself citizen" and a "do-it-yourself activist" (Alam 77). In Pakistan, the mainstream media and social media are largely male-dominated and censored by the state. Baloch's first key act of "do-it-yourself activism" was proclaiming herself Pakistani and worthy of being considered a citizen (Alam 79). By doing so, she attempted to highlight that women who did not live up to restrictive cultural notions of modesty and 'honour' were also worthy of the dignity granted to other Pakistani citizens.

In dissecting the contextual aspects of Baloch's life, activism, and eventual murder, Habiba stresses the importance of understanding different aspects of culture and life stories (Habiba 2018, 249). Baloch often implied that she feared being killed by her family or members of the community and considered settling abroad, but never migrated, choosing to continue speaking about controversial topics in public media (Habiba 249). Habiba emphasizes how just like a jigsaw puzzle, it is important to understand and study different dimensions of cultural context to truly study such a narrative (Habiba 249) This context offered by Habiba reaffirms the point that studying cases of gender-based violence without studying cultural aspects in depth can lead to incomplete understanding in academia, especially when done by Western scholars who do not understand nuances of Baloch's life, the background, and the legacy of Baloch's work in Pakistan (Habiba 249).

Conclusion

In this paper, I discussed femicide in the South Asian context by analyzing the cultural nuances of gender-based violence through the lens of South Asian feminists. I incorporated the two cases of Roop Kanwar's and Qandeel Baloch's femicide as they have overlapping cultural nuances and implications. By discussing these cases from the perspective of South Asian feminists' I have cast aside the orientalist tendency to 'other' these women, instead amplifying the personal and cultural nuances of their lives and cases. I argue that it is essential to understand and study the personal aspects of the suffering of South Asian women. When studied from a non-narrative and 'othering' lens, the understanding is incomplete and deflects from both the advocacy and suffering of these women. Thus, deconstructing the Orientalist view of South Asian women's suffering by understanding their lives and struggles in depth can prove to be a valuable approach in academia.

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